



FACEBOOK AND VIRTUAL LITERATURE CIRCLE PARTNERSHIP

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IN BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF READERS





Social networks have given rise to a reading activity called an online literature circle. Generally from four to six students meet together in an online chat room to discuss the same reading. In this environment students engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss and respond to books.

Collaboration is at the heart of this approach as students reshape and add to their understanding while they construct meaning with other readers. Through structured discussion, and extended written and artistic response, students are guided by a school librarian into a deeper understanding of what they are reading (Hill, Noe, and Johnson 2001). Online literature circles can be flexible in size, length of time, roles, content, objectives, and assessment (Burgess 2006). This virtual literature circle is an emerging example of networked social scholarship.

### Facebook: the Virtual Literature Circle Partnership

Jessie, a high school librarian, has been reading about the educational and social benefits that social scholarship can provide for her students and decides to experiment with a virtual literature circle using Facebook. Jessie decides that she will begin with one literature circle composed of a small number of students who work as

library volunteers. These students are generally avid readers but, since they are in different classes and grades, rarely interact over their reading. At an after-school meeting with the volunteers she describes her idea and invites participants. She outlines the objectives of the project, which are to design social literacy activities that will stimulate critical thinking and animated discussion. She describes the practical details; they will be reading a book a month, and using the features and applications of Facebook to respond to tasks and collaborate with members of their group. Some students are unable to make the time commitment, but six students excitedly volunteer.

### Structure and Organization

Jessie has a meeting with these six students who became the members of the virtual literature circle. She discusses thoroughly the following features and applications of Facebook that she will be using:

- **Discussion Board:** Jessie explains that she would post her comments here for them to respond.
- **Posted Items:** Here students will post their final work for Jessie and their peers to review and give feedback.
- **The Wall:** Students will use this feature to ask questions.
- **Chat:** Jessie and her students will use this feature to interact with each other and to express any thoughts, concerns, or interests about the novel.

She describes a structure that will help them focus their discussions. Every member of the group on a rotating basis will assume certain roles adapted from the work of Harvey Daniels (2002), in order to practice and master some key literacy skills. As the students

become more experienced members of the virtual literature circle, she expects that these six roles will fade into more naturalistic discussions.

*Leader:* The team leader of the group will ensure that the group's assignments meet the required standard, as well manage the group. Working in groups can engender disagreement; therefore, another role of the leader is to mediate differences when they arise.

*Literary Luminary:* This student's job is to choose a paragraph or sentences from the book to discuss with the group. The purpose is to help other students by spotlighting something interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important from the text. The student in this role should explain why those selections were chosen and provide page numbers so that other readers can locate them in the text.

*Vocabulary Enricher:* This role involves identifying a few important words in the selection. If there are words that are puzzling or unfamiliar, the student is to provide dictionary definitions for the group, as well as identifying where the words appear in the book. If the student identifies words that are important to the story, their significance will be discussed using the Facebook **Chat** feature.

*Connector:* This job entails finding connections between the book being read and the outside world. This means connecting what is read with the reader's own life, to what happens at school or in the community, to similar events at other times and places, or to other people or problems. Once the Connector has shared, each member of the group will be invited to identify their own text-to-life connection, which, of course, may refer to a different passage.



Figure 2. Example of Facebook bookshelf.



The virtual literature circle members have one more thing to do. This is to place the book they are about to read on their Facebook Bookshelf. They are very excited as they place the first book they are reading on their Facebook bookshelf. They follow her instructions:

1. Click the "Shelfari" link on your profile page at the bottom left hand corner or search it from the Applications Directory.
2. On the new page select "Shelfari books" then click on "Go to this Application." In the Search Box field enter the book title or the International Standard Book Number (ISBN), and then click "Enter."
3. Next click on "Add to Your Book Shelf," and then go to the top of the page and click "Go to Your Book Shelf." The book will appear on your Facebook bookshelf as seen in figure 2.

Jessie now goes to the Discussion Board and places a log showing when each task is to be posted and discussed. She also sets the times when all members can log on and use the **Chat** feature to converse with her.

**Recorder:** It is the recorder's responsibility to type the assignment in the "Notes" feature of Facebook if the task requires written work. If a summary is required, the recorder will be assigned to do this task.

**Clarifier:** This individual will be responsible for giving examples or for suggesting alternatives when a consensus is reached by the group.

Jessie also describes her role to the virtual literature circle members. She tells them that she is aware that her role as a guide is critical to ensuring that specific literacy skills are being developed. She also mentions that she will allow them to make choices, ask questions, and wrestle with collaborative discussion so that they will develop as independent thinkers and explore an academic use of Facebook, an environment that they know well as a social networking tool.

At this point Jessie includes her students in the selection of the novel they all would be reading. She now logs onto Facebook.com and joins, and creates a profile as shown in figure 1.

Then she creates a group profile in which she inserts the following details.

**Name:** Virtual Literature Circle.

**Type of group:** Books and Literature

**Description:** To develop and improve students' literacy skills while experimenting with an academic use of a social networking tool.

**Access:** Closed group. (Jessie asks her students not to invite others to join the literature circle.)

**Related groups:** None (At the end of this trial, Jesse may want to expand to other student groups or ask additional students to join the group. They will be selected from here.)

Jessie then invites the group members to create a new Facebook profile not connected to one that they have for personal use. At this juncture Jessie customizes the privacy settings from the Privacy page so that only the virtual literature circle group members can view each other's activities. She does this by going to the Privacy page and clicking the word "Profile" to customize the Privacy page.

Figure 1. Group creation form in Facebook.





## Beginning Discussions

Jessie realizes that she needs to teach social skills before her students begin working because these skills facilitate successful interactions among people. According to Burke (2008), "teaching these skills will ensure that conflicts are minimized or do not occur." Jesse uses the T-chart in figure 3 to both practice discussion in the Facebook environment and make explicit the skills of working in groups.

As students begin to read the book, they also begin posting responses related to their assigned task on the **Discussion Board**. For example, the Connector finds a link between the book and something that happened in the school community. He posts this on the Discussion Board and, once shared, each member of the group responds, some commenting on the Connector's post, others making their own personal connections.

Likewise, the Literary Luminary proposes a paragraph to be discussed by the members of the group. They use the **Chat** feature to do this. The Leader encourages members of the group who hang back and enriches discussions by pointing out differences and similarities, and by moderating disagreements. Group members who desire help from other group members or Jessie may post their requests for assistance on the **Discussion Board**. Jessie views the postings before school and once in the late afternoon or early evening, makes comments, and offers feedback to guide students as they work with each other. At the end of the project Jessie goes to the Facebook Gift section, selects a gift for each student, and sends it them to acknowledge their accomplishments. Each group member is willing to participate in an evaluation of the project along with Jessie to find out the impact it has made on him or her.

## Evaluation of the Program

Jessie asks group members to evaluate a number of elements: their individual participation, the group's effectiveness, the merits (or difficulties) encountered in using Facebook for a virtual literature circle, and the products or tasks they completed. She will use this data to make changes when this activity is repeated. Jessie also evaluates the products and processes. She focuses on three main areas:

# Working in groups...

Figure 3. T-chart

### LOOKS LIKE

posting your tasks on time

collaborating with group members and librarian

students learning happily

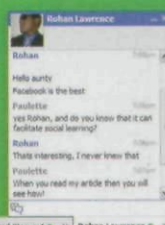
team leader observing members' activities carefully chattering and laughing in the Facebook environment

### SOUNDS LIKE

calling team members for help

students learning happily

chattering and laughing in the Facebook environment





- 1) *Cognitive*: What evidence does she have that students developed the literacy skills she identified as objectives?
- 2) *Affective*: What evidence does she have that students' social skills, attitudes, and emotions have changed or matured?
- 3) *Psychomotor*: Did students' report improved practical skills related to using Facebook?

Students' responses and her own notes encourage Jessie to continue the project using different books and changing the roles so that her students can learn new skills. When group members tell friends from another high school in the district about their project, those students approach their own librarian about starting a virtual literature circle. Jessie's experience and advice persuades this librarian to begin a discussion group parallel to hers. Jessie adds the second literature circle under Facebook's "Related Groups." The project begins again with these two virtual literature circles reading another novel. Jessie is pleased with the progress of her idea, and recognizes that social

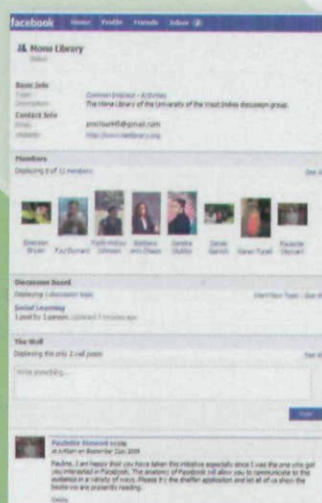
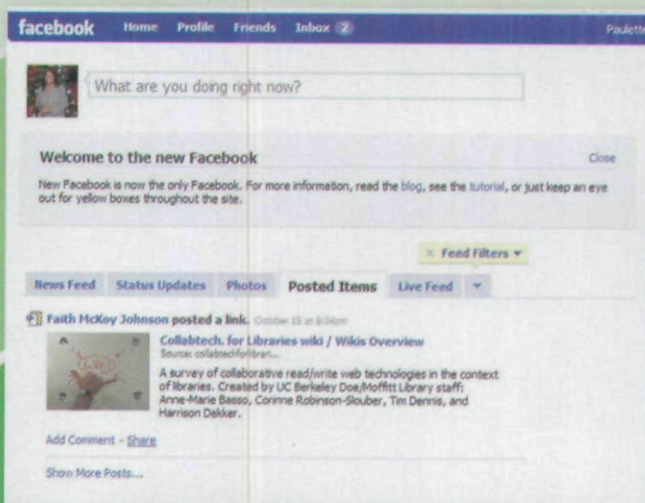
learning theory and the cooperative learning design played a major role in its success.

### Background to Jesse's Success

Jessie's virtual literature circle was successful because it aligned with the theoretical basis of social learning. Vygotsky's social learning theory points out that social scholarship plays an important role in cognitive development because students are able to interact, share experiences, and learn from one another (Learning Theories Knowledgebase 2008b). Bandura's social learning theory highlights the fact that people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling (Learning Theories Knowledgebase 2008a). The addition of technology provides the opportunity to improve human cognition, interaction, and even social relations as teacher and students are able to effectively communicate educational content that students are able to grasp and share with each another. It has become evident "that sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding" (Zywicki n.d., 1).

Jessie's success was also the result of her knowledge of cooperative learning design (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1994). This theoretical framework consists of five elements. These are *positive interdependence*, *individual accountability*, *group processing*, *face-to-face interaction*, and *social skills*. By creating a small heterogeneous group of students with a genuine interest in working together, Jessie knew that the group would function collaboratively. As a cooperative learning group, her students demonstrated *positive interdependence* as they were encouraged to ask each other for assistance when experiencing difficulty. To guarantee *individual accountability*, Jessie used the features of Facebook to view the progress of each student and interject support if necessary because she knew that, if any group member's task was incomplete, the group's work would also be incomplete. Jessie designed the structure to ensure *group processing*, which meant that individuals were expected to evaluate final work and make suggested changes from other group members before they posted the assignment to the "Notes" area of Facebook. Since these students volunteered in the library during different periods and it was unlikely

that they could often meet in a classroom setting together, Jessie's use of the **Chat** feature of Facebook substituted for *face-to-face interaction*. Adding these elements of cooperative learning design ensured the quality completion of the group's assigned tasks and substantial individual participation.





Jesse concluded that the Facebook virtual literature circle was an excellent teaching environment for social and group work. The development of group dynamics and the application of cooperative structures encouraged equal and shared responsibility from all (Bales n.d.), including even the quietest students. According to Klages, Pate, and Conforti, "One of the most substantial benefits of online collaboration in virtual classrooms is the increased chance that students who are usually shy and reserved will likely participate more in e-mail discussions" (2007, 296). Participants in the virtual literature circle were able to gain social value by developing mutual respect and, as a result, felt comfortable sharing ideas with each other. Respect for other people's ideas and learning from other perspectives are crucial skills both in the classroom and later life (Kolu and Volotinen 2004).

Undoubtedly, Facebook is a popular social utility that is widely used among students in high schools, colleges, and universities. With an understanding of social learning theory, the school librarian can use affordances in Facebook to turn a predominantly social experience into a successful academic learning environment and, in the process, scaffold the development of students' literacy skills.

Farkas supports using popular social networks for library programs. "It makes sense to look at what social networking sites our patrons frequent and how we can provide services there" (2007, 27). Librarians report that they gain credibility from using social networks. For example, "librarians at Penn State have found that since they have created and promoted their own Facebook profiles during instruction sessions and reference interactions, they have

seen increased research assistance requests in not only their Facebook message boxes, but also in their institutional e-mail and even in person" (Mack et al 2007, 1). It is clear from this case study that Facebook can be beneficial to both students and librarians, positioning school librarians as innovative, interesting, and influential, as well as supporting engaging and relevant learning among students.



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